

From Large Scale Installations to Small Figurative Vessels

An Honors Thesis (ACR 418)

by

Megan Lange

Thesis Advisors

Slate Grove and Ted Neal

Ball State University

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ABSTRACT

During my time at Ball State, I have chosen to take upon two majors in the Fine Arts College: glass and ceramics. For completion of both my glass and ceramics degrees, a thesis show presenting a body of work of our choosing is required. For my honors thesis, I have chosen to discuss both theses.

Ethereal Landscape

Ethereal Landscape is a body of work that was created to evoke emotion in the viewer. Using references from my past, I have chosen to create two pieces, *A Stroll through the Prairie* and *The Bubbling River*. I utilize blown glass forms, as well as metal and fabric components, to recreate these scenes. The glass, in conjunction with colored lighting, creates an environment for the viewer to explore and experience. Being able to experience nature has been a heavy influence in my upbringing. When I was young, I often used these spaces as a means of escape, relaxation, and exploration. As an artist, I wanted to recreate environments for the viewers that allow for fascination and exploration. My desire is for the viewer to get lost in this body of work, much as I did and still do when exploring nature.

Vessels of Gesture

Vessels of Gesture is a play on vessel making. I have always been drawn to forms that show movement. For me, there is something enticing about the way a stiff piece of clay can seem like it is moving through space. For this body of work, I have chosen to take the vessel form and abstract it in a way that shows figurative movement.

The forms in this series of work were originally based off of dancers in flowing dresses. In an attempt to abstractly play on vessel making, I have used these human

inspirations to allude to our inclination to talk about vessels as if they were a body. A vessel has parts such as a foot, waist, shoulder, and lip. I have chosen to explore a variety of scales in this series, from something that can be held in the hand to nearly life size vessels. The smaller, or typical sized vessels were made in this size to emulate the craft side of ceramics. The three larger vessels encompass the sculptural side of ceramics, letting the viewer still see the glimpse of vessel, but abstracting that notion even further. My goal for this work is to use these sculptural ceramic vessels of varying sizes to encapsulate movement, as well as the connection we make of vessels and the human form.

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Process Analysis Statement

When I first began deciding what avenue I wanted for my glass thesis I was lost. I started to become more interested in sculptural work after originally wanting to make nothing but vessels. I was trying to force my work to be about the vessel; trying to take vessels and turn them into an installation. I think I was more concerned about showing my skill set to prove to myself that I had become a proficient glass blower.

After numerous sketches and multiple tests, I had settled on making three large scale sculptures that each demonstrated a different emotion. The body of work was going to be about how the combination of glass and light could express emotions of rage, excitement, and contentment. I

planned to make a giant wave of black and white glass shards that curved over the viewer and bathed in red lighting to express aggression, along with a small blue calming bubble installation and medium sized sculpture that was made of twisted blown pieces of



glass to portray excitement. About half way through the semester I not only had the realization that this giant wave of aggression just was not feasible, but I realized there was a deeper meaning behind the work. I was not just trying to make sculptures that evoked emotion but were reminiscent of places where I felt these emotions.

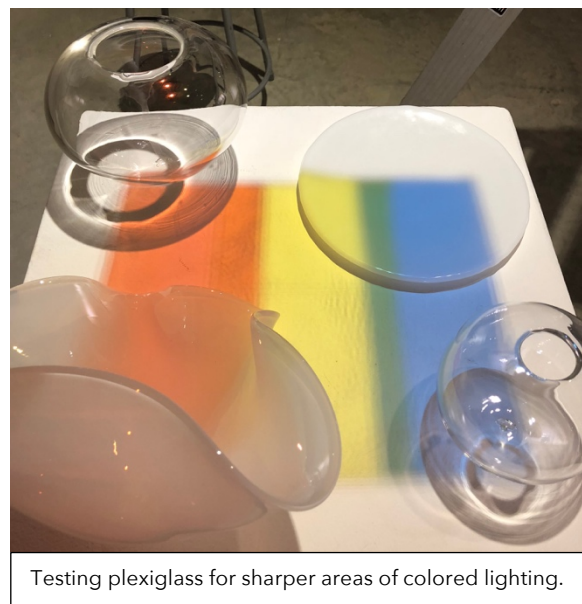
My glass thesis concept had changed to be more about growing up near a large wooded area; a place where I could escape the real world. After a life of country living, four years at a college in the biggest city I had ever lived in had changed the connection to nature that I held so dear. I wanted to create an atmosphere in which

the viewer had the ability to 'get lost in the woods' as I did. To do this, I realized I needed to create a large-scale installation that allowed the viewer to be enveloped in this atmosphere.

Ethereal Landscape was my first real attempt at a large-scale installation. This body of work allowed me to also experience the world of production glass blowing. I spent countless hours in the hot shop (glass studio for glass blowing and other hot glass processes) and created over 400 blown glass pieces that went into the installation. Although each blade of grass and bubble of the river were different, the same process was used to make each piece. This repetition allowed me to reach a deeper understanding of glass as a material and how it can be manipulated and persuaded.

Whenever an artist is making work, it is important to acknowledge what material we are using and why. Glass was essential for this installation to work properly. One of my biggest fascinations with glass is its ability to manipulate and transform light. In order to get the desired shadows and color interactions, I needed the clarity and reflectiveness that glass possesses. To get the desired shapes, I needed to use the fluidity of glass in the blown glass process.

For this installation, I wanted to use the lighting to not only assist in the mood of the piece, but to use the shadows to enlarge the body of work. I investigated multiple methods of coloring the light. I experimented with plexiglass in an attempt to get more ridged color blocks as well as additional pieces of glass. I eventually realized that the lighting gel sheets



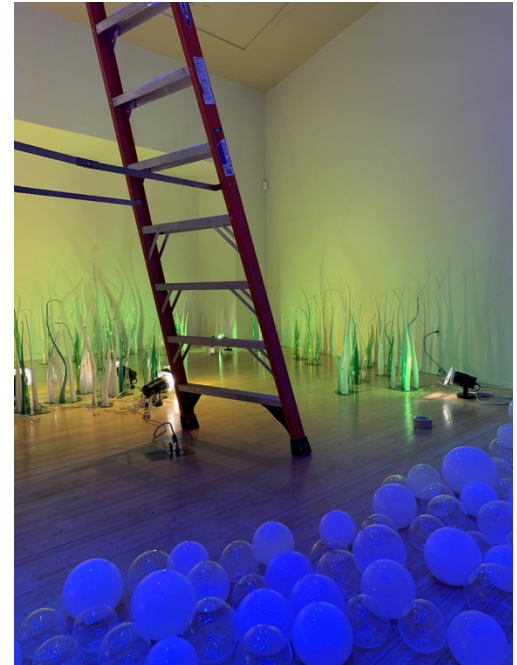
used in theater were my best option. From there, I tested at least a hundred different colors, trying to find the color combinations that helped encapsulate the feelings of excitement and serenity I was trying to portray. I also tested placement of the lighting. If I only used the provided lights in the gallery, I would not have gotten the cast shadows on the wall that I desired. I added additional lighting from the floor to get the desired shadows. Having some of the lighting on the floor also increased the interactivity of the piece. The viewers were able to walk through the patches of prairie grass in front of the lighting, thus changing the installation as they experienced it.

Not only was the color of the lighting important, but the color of the glass was equally important. I questioned whether I wanted the glass to be transparent, opaque, white, or green. If the glass was transparent the light would go through, if it is opaque it would have a greater shadow. If the glass was white it allows the pieces to be colored by the light, but if the glass was green it would look more like the big blue stem grass that the piece was inspired from. Ultimately, I decided to include both transparent, opaque, green, white, and clear glass in my pieces. I felt that the array helped bring a sense of liveliness to the piece that I may not have gotten with just all white glass.

I think it was extremely beneficial for myself to take on the daunting task of a large-scale installation. There are so many things that I had to think about as an artist. I had to think about form, craft, concept, and the final presentation. I questioned if my artist statement and work portray the same thing and if those messages are conveyed. Having to make so many pieces in order to even start to see what the

installation is going to look like can become discouraging, not to mention the fact I did not see it completely together until installation day added to the difficulty.

I am pleased with how the show turned out; however, I feel there is always room for improvement. After having my work installed, I realized I would like to combine the two installations to create one landscape. I feel that the knowledge I gained from this experience has not only made me a more proficient glass blower, but a stronger artist.



Install day. Deciding placement and lighting.

I decided to create an entirely different show for ceramics. After dealing with nothing but large-scale sculptural work in glass, I wanted to make smaller, more intimate work. After sketching and reflecting on my previous ceramic work, these objects turned into abstracted vessels which then became figurative vessels showing movement.

The first pieces I made had a very direct figurative reference. They had prominent legs, waists, and arms. I then tried to make a few vessels by taking a thrown vase and pushing out sections that looked like arms, hips, etc. Neither direction was satisfying to me. As I searched for more inspiration, I came across photos of dancers in long flowing dresses.



This sparked my interest in creating more abstracted vessel. The vessels became more voluminous with long necks and feet with bulbous bodies. These pieces were becoming the abstracted figures I was interested in exploring.

I began making the pieces by coil-building the forms. I started by making a rounded shape. I would build the pieces on foam or use a stiff coil of clay to nestle the piece into which allowed the

bottoms to stay rounded. There was a lot of trial and error in building these pieces. Clay is very fickle. If it is too wet, clay can collapse, or if it is too dry, then the weight of more clay can cause the bottoms to break as they continue to dry. I learned this lesson a



Example of coil building process on foam.

few times. Working through these abstracted forms allowed me to learn a lot about my ability to push the clay. Learning how aggressive of a curve I can create and how much weight the smaller feet could hold became crucial to my work. After the 'bodies' of the vessels were created, I would throw the necks and feet of the forms on the pottery wheel. For some pieces, the components were made specifically to fit certain forms, but for other pieces I was a little looser. I would throw more necks than needed and feel around for which piece they belonged to. Figuring out the center of gravity became highly important for the pieces with a smaller attached foot.

I then began making smaller vessels that did not have this attached thrown foot. These pieces, for me, had a much stronger human



Pieces without thrown feet

reference. They look as if they are about to take a leap or strike a pose.

After looking back on this series of work, it seems as though I have two bodies of work within the series. There are the small very gestural pieces that look like they are interacting with each other, and then there are the larger pieces that, while are still figurative, take on a different emphasis. The larger pieces start to morph from the vessel. They still have hints of vessel like qualities but are more abstracted. They still reference the human form but are more ambiguous and begin to suggest things such as organs. Throughout the duration of making, I thought it was important to maintain the idea of a vessel. Since the entire show was about the fact that we talk about vessels with personification. I have come to realize that this notion was just the starting point for the work. I think I held myself back a bit from what could have been because I was so focused on making sure the pieces were still vessels. Had I allowed myself to be more open, I think the pieces might have been even more abstract.

Ethereal Landscape

Significance / Relevance

Ethereal Landscape is an expression of scenes found in nature, and the evocative atmosphere they can create. Using glass and filtered lighting, I am striving to recreate these scenes and encapsulate the emotive responses they inspire.

Installations are becoming prevalent in the contemporary art world. Artists are using these installations to take over their acquired spaces to fabricate an entirely new area. I have always been captivated by installation work. I am infatuated with the idea that we as artists can captivate and consume the viewer and, in a sense, overwhelm them with an installation. With an installation, I have the ability to go past the boundaries of a typical pedestal that is often used for display of three-dimensional work. By using abstracted blown forms and filtered lighting, I am able to break down the certain moods I am trying to convey to a simple structure. Using these components allows me to create an environment for the viewer to exist in that can be understood on a more primitive level, opening the piece up to a wider audience range.

As artists, we portray what we love and what we are drawn to; often using our past experiences to guide our voice. In *Ethereal Landscape*, I am using my past experiences in nature to draw upon certain areas where I find peace that I may recreate these feelings for the viewer. Growing up I was fortunate to have a large wooded area at my disposal, as well as vast fields of prairie grasses. I would often play and explore in these areas. When I wanted excitement and adventure I would run into the prairie and get lost in the wonders of nature. When I needed to relax, I would look for the serenity in the streams and wetlands that surrounded me.

During my college career, I feel that I have lost that connection to nature that I hold so dear. *Ethereal Landscape* is my attempt to reconnect with nature while utilizing my fascination with glass and light.

Influences

From family members and glass artists to nature and lighting, this series of work has an array of influences. When deciding what I was going to do for my thesis, I knew that I was fascinated with the interaction between light and glass. Light has the ability to manipulate glass; to emphasize and to multiply. Early on I decided I was going to use light as a means of emphasis. After some discoveries with my past works, I realized the lighting is as equally important as the glass itself.

I then began looking at works by artists such as Olafur Eliasson. I was fascinated with his ability to use light on glass to takeover a room. His work also led me to question where the color is coming from. I knew that I wanted to incorporate different colors to help evoke the certain feeling each piece is trying to achieve. Through my research and love of theater, I realized that colored lighting could be just as powerful, if not more, than the colors on the pieces. Thus, I decided to keep the pieces as a white landscape for color to be projected on.



Olafur Eliasson, *Colour Tunnel*, 2015

Another artist I became interested in is Tara Donovan. She too was able to use multiple components to take over the gallery space and create installations that overwhelm the viewer. Looking at her work made me realize how badly I wanted to create a body of work that consumes the viewer.

The natural aspect came from the influence of my grandfather. I have been privileged to grow up surrounded by woods and fields of prairie grasses. This gave me the opportunity to wander off and appreciate the spoils of the natural environment and connect myself to it. I think that deep



Tara Donovan, *Untitled*, 2004

down I knew I wanted to incorporate aspects of nature into my work because of its rich connection to my past. I also wanted to let people experience the wonder I still feel when walking through a bed of prairie grasses, or a stream of gently flowing water.

Process/Technique

The idea for this body of work came about as it was being made. I have always been fascinated with the interaction between light and glass. At first, I knew that I wanted to project light onto glass and use the shadows to continue the piece. In my development, the lighting became as important as the glass. Because the lighting was just as important, I became attracted to the idea of the pieces getting their color from the lighting. I was researching a lot about color theory and became interested in how colors, specifically colored lighting, can dramatically change the mood that a

piece creates. This led me to thinking back on my childhood and how certain parts of nature would create shifts in my mood. Thus, this body of work was formed.

After preliminary sketches, I began to just make. All of the glass components have been made in the hot blowing process. I started with the piece, *The Bubbling River*. This piece required additions of color as well as baking soda to create the numerous amounts of bubbles on each piece. I then transitioned into making the blades of grass for *A Stroll through the Prairie*. These also required additions of color, as well as pulling and manipulating the glass. Throughout the creation process, I would take the pieces and assemble them so I could see how they would fit together, and whether or not I felt more components where needed. Throughout the numerous iterations, I began testing the various colored lighting options to find the best fit. Once most of the glass pieces were created, I began to concern myself with the bases of the pieces. In the decision of this process, I was looking at materials that would have a reflective quality, as well as materials that seemed to fit the aesthetic.

Description of Work



The two pieces in this body of work create an environment as though you are walking through an abstracted wooded area. *A Stroll Through the Prairie* has patches of grass aligned along two walls. Their proximity to the wall allows for filtered lighting to shine from the ground onto the pieces and the wall. The lighting is filtered in greens, yellows, and oranges that create the feeling of dusk. Doing this creates colored shadows that multiply the pieces and make it seem as though the fields continue on. In continuing with the color scheme, the grasses are an array of greens, whites and clears that allow for the filtered color to continuously play off of the glass. There are also patches of grass in the center to create a path for the viewer to walk through. This path allows to viewers to stroll through the grasses and provide a playful interaction between the piece and the viewer.



As the viewer walks through the path, they come to *The Bubbling River*. This piece is a collection of blown white and clear glass bubbles that are displayed over a white cloth. The white cloth in conjunction with the bubbles are cascaded in blue hues of projected light. This creates a very calm and serene feel and allows for rest of the viewers eyes after the high intensity of the greens in yellows.

Artist Statement

As many of us do, when I was younger, I lived in a bubble that was free from death, hatred, and all the other problems of the world. I chose to ignore the negativity and go play in my grandparent's woods behind our house. I would take walks when I needed to calm myself, when I needed peace and quiet, or even when I just wanted to reconnect myself with nature. For this art installation, I chose to draw from two of the places I would often go to; the prairie grass fields and my favorite stream. The goal of this body of work is to evoke emotion. My intention is to make the viewer feel a certain way while experiencing the forms bathed in colored light. For the piece, *A Stroll Through the Prairie*, I want the viewers to experience excitement, joy, and wonder. The piece, *The Bubbling River*, creates a different emotion of calmness and serenity that I hope to convey to the viewer. I have chosen these places because they allowed me to escape. Lately, I have been longing for the times when I may be care-free. *Ethereal Landscape* has become about those havens.

I aim for this work to consume the viewer long enough that they are momentarily freed from the negativity in the world by getting lost in the glass, light, and shadows. I have always been infatuated with how light interacts with glass. I appreciate how the right lighting can positively change a piece by making it larger or creating a different ambiance. I also enjoy how much information can be hidden in the shadows and the glass when it is lit with a different color. I want the viewer to be so intrigued by the piece that they spend the time to look closely at the glass and pick up on all these subtleties. At least for the moment, the viewer will be enveloped in this interaction of light and glass, so much so, that they are momentarily freed from the stresses of everyday life, as I was when I was playing in the woods, and as I am now when I look at glass.

Exhibition List

A Stroll through the Prairie

glass, metal, and filtered lighting; installation

The Bubbling River

glass, fabric, and filtered lighting; installation

Vessels of Gesture

Significance/Relevance

This body of work is a play on the way that we talk about vessels in the three-dimensional art world. Typically, we talk about a form's waist, its shoulders, foot, etc. My sculptural vessels accentuate these features in an abstracted and playful way that allows the forms to become figurative and have a sense of movement.

The abstract vessels that I have created for this body of work have thrown necks, some also having thrown feet, that reference typical vessel forms. The bodies of the vessels more abstractly reference areas of the human form such as the shoulders and waists. I have always thought it interesting that we talk about vessels as if they were the human form. I wanted to convey this idea of the vessel being human, but not so much so that it looks like a loosely created human vessel, thus, I decided to make the movement and abstract forms of the body of the vessels convey the human-like qualities.

This work is meant to question our use of the human form when discussing vessels, as well as provide an enjoyable way to abstract the functional form into sculptural vessels that take on a sense of liveliness.

Influences

The desire to begin this body of work stemmed from some prior larger vessels. In critiques, these thrown forms were talked about as very feminine. We discussed how the placement of the curves resembled that of the curves of a woman. It was in these pieces that I began my interest in exploring our desire as



humans to personify the inanimate. As I began thinking about this idea and creating sketches, I often looked at images of dancers in long flowing dresses for inspiration. The movement that is created between the dancer's body and the dress was very enticing.

Matt Kelleher was a big influence with this body of work as his functional forms evoke a sense of movement that I find interesting. These forms, while abstract, have curves mimicking the human form. These forms influenced my sketches and maquettes, leading me to a greater understanding of how far a piece can be abstracted while still being personified.



Process/Technique

My interest in this work began as a question of why, when talking about vessels, that the forms described by using figural references and elements. Furthermore, I was intrigued in this idea that the human form described is often womanly. After sketches and maquettes, I realized I wanted to step back from the obvious gender references and focus more on the vessel itself. Over time, the concepts behind these pieces became more about referencing the abstracted body.



To physically portray this concept, I am either using the coil building process or soft-slab pocket construction. When attached, the addition of thrown elements of 'feet' and 'necks' help bring the forms to life. For the larger pieces, a general design is planned out and then built with coils of clay. The benefits of working with this process is to be able to create drastic angles and manipulate the form in a very methodical way. The small vessels are built by taking two manipulated slabs of clay and attaching them together to form a pocket. I am able to work much looser with this process. The designs for these pieces are drawn on a whim, replicated on a second slab, and then connected to create a closed pocket. I am then able to throw multiple spouts and feet, if so desired, and attach them to the clay pockets.

The surface design for these forms has been the most difficult part of the creation process. After playing with patterning and imagery, I decided it was better to leave the surface simple, allowing the form, and simple light and shadow, to define the surface. I had contemplated additions of figurative imagery on the pieces, which I felt changed the concept of the work, and then tested various forms of linework, which then seemed to flatten the volume that these pieces possess.

Having made multiple pieces and iterations of these abstracted vessels, the meaning of this work continues to be about the discussion of form in a figurative manner but also alludes to pushing the limits of what we consider a vessel to be.

Description of Work



This piece, *Excitement*, captures the playful essence that the *Vessels of Gesture* body of work exhibits. The biggest strength I find in this piece is the gesture. This piece looks as though it is standing on one foot, putting its arms and other leg in the air as if it were about to leap with excitement. *Excitement* captures a sense of joy. This piece illustrates the personification of a vessel that I desired to attain with this body of work.



The strength in the piece, *Ambulate*, comes from its ability to perceive us with its ability to stand on such a small foot. This piece not only provides an intensity given by its ability to balance on the foot, but the feeling as though it is about to take a step. This larger piece begins to not only provide a sense of movement but connects to the human form in a more abstracted way. *Ambulate* does not take on the lively movement of leaping for joy like *Excitement* does. Instead, *Ambulate* begins to allude to other aspects of a human such as resemblance to organs or other body parts.

Artist Statement

We take a form and personify it as though we are analyzing the shape and gesture of a human being. No matter what vessel we make, it comes up in conversation that the piece has a small foot, or broad shoulders. For this body of work, I decided to take the notion of the personification of vessels in a more literal sense.

Although I aimed to keep the forms abstract, I started morphing the shapes of the forms to give stronger illusions of shoulders, hips, and waists. The smaller forms start to look as if they are about to take a leap, go for a walk, or even strike a pose. The larger forms, while still possessing a sense of movement, may start to allude to other human body parts such as organs.

Whether it be in art, nature, or anything else around us, we use the familiarity of the human form as a sense of comfort and connection. My intent for this body of work is for the viewer to acknowledge our constant inclination to make the inanimate come to life.

Exhibition List

Ambulate

Stoneware, House Paint, 26" x 12" x 55"

Vivacious

Stoneware, House Paint, 30" x 30" x 47"

Ostentatious

Stoneware, Underglaze, 10" x 5" x 18"

Emulation

Stoneware, Underglaze, largest 4" x 1" x 7"

Salient

Stoneware, Underglaze, largest 4" x 2" x 8"

Exuberance

Stoneware, Underglaze, largest 8" x 2" x 9"

Effervescent

Stoneware, Underglaze, largest 11" x 2" x 8"

Caper

Stoneware, Underglaze, largest 7" x 2" x 8"

Dalliance

Stoneware, Underglaze, largest 11" x 4" x 14"

Excitement

Stoneware, Underglaze, 4" x 1" x 7"

Works Cited

Kelleher, Matt. Title Unknown. *Matt Keller, Potter, Educator*.

<http://www.mattkelleher.com/pottery>.